

Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development in Chilean State-Funded Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study on professional development in Chilean state-funded early childhood education. Based on a multiple-case study design and drawing on qualitative methods we explored teachers' perspectives on professional development at two early childhood educational centers. Two centers' directors and four early childhood teachers employed at the two major institutions offering initial education in Chile described and discussed their experiences in a variety of professional development activities. Findings reveal that, although participants value professional development and have access to a wide range of activities, their experience of professional development could be improved in several ways. Conditions identified as critical to maximize the benefits derived from professional development include (a) access to ongoing training activities for a greater number of teachers, (b) greater duration and depth in professional development sessions, (c) more opportunities to receive training guided by experts, (d) more training focused in topics related to language and socioemotional development, (e) improvement of teacher's preservice education, and (f) improvement of working conditions. The article concludes with suggestions for teacher education programs, professional development designers, and policymakers, offered in the light of the results.

Keywords

Professional development; early childhood teachers; initial education; state-funded early childhood education; Chile

The number of children who spend time in preschool has risen significantly over recent years. Part of the reason for this has been the *increasing participation of women in paid work*. In addition, governmental policies intended to augment preschool attendance have been created, allegedly as an attempt to foster fairness and equality of opportunity by offsetting the differences in children's backgrounds. Today, as a result, many children under 5 years of age spend this critical developmental period of their lives not only with their primary caregivers, but also with preschool staff.

The increased demand for early childhood education has been accompanied by an intensification of the debate about what constitutes quality education for young children. One approach to understanding quality has defined it in terms of the structural variables (e.g., physical setting and furnishings, group size, adult-child ratio, teacher training) and process variables (e.g., type and tone of teacher-child interaction, interaction between children). In the last decade, quality has also been increasingly conceived in terms of aggregated child outcomes—an approach that emphasises school readiness as the main goal for early childhood education. Yet another approach suggesting a more comprehensive definition of quality includes several dimensions of early childhood educational settings such as classroom dynamics, classroom structural variables, staff characteristics, administration and support services, parent involvement, and community resources and involvement (Lambert, Abbott-Shim, & Sibley, 2006). Regardless of the criteria used to define quality, teachers' education remains a major factor influencing the potential benefit children can obtain from early education. Therefore, it is critical that those in charge of young children's education have the preparation needed to provide students with the best possible early educational environments.

Along with initial education, professional development (PD) is one of the main avenues by which teachers can acquire the tools needed to educate young children. PD provides existing early childhood teachers with knowledge, skills, and abilities that they may not have or acquired in preservice programs and that are essential to perform their jobs effectively. PD also has the potential to maintain teachers' skills and update knowledge. This is especially important in early childhood education, a field where the body of knowledge that is the backbone of the profession draws from diverse and rapidly growing disciplines such as pedagogy, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, and cultural studies.

This article adds to the literature about early childhood teachers' PD by discussing the results of a study, conducted between November 2013 and February 2014, aimed to better understand the state of early childhood PD in Chile from the perspective of the staff employed in institutions funded by the state. Specifically, the research question driving the study was: How do teachers employed at state-funded Chilean early childhood educational institutions perceive their PD opportunities?

Chilean context in early childhood education

In Chile, early childhood education is defined as the educational level that serves children comprehensively from birth until school entrance. As stated by the Ministry of Education, the purpose of early childhood education is “to systematically foster the comprehensive development as well as the relevant and significant learning of children in accordance with the early childhood education national curriculum”(Ley General de Educación [General Education Law] 2009, Article 18; first author's translation).

Early childhood education in Chile is not mandatory, except for kindergarten, which has been a requirement to enter primary education since 2013. The state must promote and guarantee free access to early childhood education to all children 4 or more years old. However, for those children whose families are part of the 60% socioeconomically more vulnerable, the state must provide free access to early childhood education to children of all ages. The state's duty to provide early childhood education is fulfilled through institutions that receive state funding. Over 90% of the enrolment in early childhood education occurs in institutions that receive some kind of funding from the state (Ministerio de Educación, 2013).

The Ministry of Education is responsible for designing policies for early childhood education, funding the institutions that provide it, and creating the national curriculum for early childhood education. The current curriculum was published in 2001 and constitutes a broad and flexible framework that includes principles, learning objectives, and orientations for working with children. This curriculum is nonprescriptive, aiming instead to provide general guidelines to orient the more specific curricula that institutions offering early childhood education develop and implement.

It is estimated that there are over 39,000 people working in early childhood centers at the classroom level, most of them being technicians in early childhood education and the minority being early childhood teachers (Ministerio de Educación, 2013). The difference between the two is the duration and depth of their education. Typically, "technicians" hold a two-year certificate in early childhood education while "teachers" hold a university degree of four to five years. Both technicians and teachers work directly with children but the teachers are the professionals responsible for the classroom. Depending on the institutional policies and the age of children attending, each classroom might have one or several technicians supporting the teacher, who might have one or two classrooms of which they are in charge.

Unfortunately, there is no legislation that regulates a specific career plan for early childhood teachers, including their: entry to the workforce; in-service professional development; promotion and incentives associated with performance and experience; and retirement. Therefore, once teachers join the workforce, the type and amount of PD available to them depends on the priorities and resources of the institutions in which teachers are employed. Most teachers (85%) work in an institution that, to some extent, depends administratively on the state and receives funding from it, while the remaining 15% are employed in private institutions (Pardo & Adlerstein, 2015). Some of the professional development activities—mandatory or optional—available at the institutions are intended for the entire staff working at the centers, while other activities are offered exclusively to either early childhood teachers or technicians only. Typically, the institutions that design and offer PD are the Ministry of Education, Junta Nacional de Jardines Infantiles (National Board of Kindergartens; JUNJI) and Integra Foundation (the two main institutions offering early childhood education founded by the state), and universities and independent academic centers.

Moreover, insufficient teacher preservice preparation has been identified as one of the main causes of unsatisfactory early childhood education in the country and concern has been expressed regarding the gap between the preparation of early childhood teachers and the challenges they must face once in the workforce (García-Huidobro, 2006). The need to improve initial teacher education and professional development (not limited to early childhood) has also been stated in the OECD Economic Survey of Chile

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012a). In support of the country's efforts to have better educated teachers, the Ministry of Education developed standards for the preparation of early childhood professionals (Ministerio de Educación, 2012). Nonetheless, the concern about early childhood teachers' qualifications has aroused attention mostly to their preservice education, whereas little attention has been paid to in-service professional development. A recent exception are a few studies on the outcomes of a cluster-randomized evaluation—using standardized measures for classroom and child outcomes—of a two-year teacher professional development program for state-funded prekindergartens and kindergartens (Bonnes Bowne, Yoshikawa, & Snow, 2016; Mendive, Weiland, Yoshikawa, & Snow, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2015). The study presented in this article adds to this incipient corpus of research by offering a focus on teachers' perspectives, an approach that have not been explored in previous studies on Chilean early childhood PD.

Prior background and research

Professional development (PD) is understood as the process of continuous education undertaken by early childhood teachers once they are part of the workforce. More precisely, PD refers to the “opportunities for staff who are already working in the sector to update or enhance their practices” (OECD, 2012a, p. 144). PD in early childhood has two primary objectives. First, it is anticipated that it will “advance the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices of early childhood providers in their efforts to educate children and support families. A second objective is to promote a culture of ongoing professional growth in individuals and systems” (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009, p. 379).

Apart from formal education—the degrees that a person attains within a formal education system—PD efforts in early childhood education typically take the form of: specialized training; on-the-job in-service training, coaching, and communities of practice or collegial study groups (Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006). Definitions and descriptions of these forms of PD are provided next.

Specialized training

Although the term *training* is used in a variety of ways in the context of early childhood education, it is mostly understood as PD activities that take place outside the formal education system (Hawkins, Crim, Thornton, & Warren, 2010). Training provides specific skill instruction or content knowledge to be applied in the job to practitioners that often have a variety of backgrounds and educational experiences (Tout, Zaslow, & Berry, 2006).

Training may include one or more activities such as conferences, professional meetings, workshops, live or web-based lectures or discussions, live or video demonstrations, visits to other childcare or education programs, manuals, tutorials, and other strategies designed to impart knowledge and information in an attempt to impact professional practice (Maxwell, Feild, & Clifford, 2006; Sheridan et al., 2009). Usually, on-the-job in-service training activities and events tend to be short in duration (often one-shot sessions) and rely on trainers considered to be “experts” with whom participants have few opportunities for repeated contact. In addition, follow-up or feedback on observed

practice is absent in most in-service training programs (Pianta, 2006). Consequently, if training is not carefully designed and implemented to meet teachers' needs, it may be superficial and of little support to affect teacher's practices (Hawkins et al., 2010). However, in-service training provides an opportunity for teachers' professional advancement if it: provides sustained interactions instead of brief sessions; emphasizes substantive interrelated topics instead of unrelated topics; expects teachers to be active learners, in contrast to passive listeners; and emphasizes the why and how of teaching, instead of focusing exclusively on skill development (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). In a meta-analysis of 17 studies published between 1980 and 2005, Fukkink and Lont (2007) found that specialized training, under certain conditions, improves the competencies of early childhood teachers, including their knowledge, attitudes, and skills. All training programs, however, are not equal, and those lacking a clear structure or curriculum have the potential to do more harm than good.

Coaching

The term "coaching", in the context of PD programs for teachers, is used to refer to "an apprenticeship model of an experienced mentor who help other teachers become more effective, reflective and evaluative in their daily work with children through individualized, ongoing, and intensive PD" (Sandefur, Warren, Gamble, Holcombe, & Hicks, 2010, p. 88). The practice of including coaching as part of PD programs to improve teachers' quality appeared mainly as an attempt to fill the gap between knowledge and effective application that had not been accomplished by previous education, training, or practical experience (Sandefur et al., 2010). Coaching can take a more directive approach, telling teachers how to adjust instruction, or a more reflective approach, where coaches use teachers' self-reflection to enhance knowledge and improve instructional practices (Joyce & Showers, 2002). According to Sandefur et al. (2010), the coaching model described in the literature is usually directive because of the low education levels and high turnover of the early childhood workforce in general. The directive approach has proven to be more appealing to novice teachers but less likely to impact the practices of veteran teachers. The reflective approach is considered a more collaborative model in which coaches and teachers focus on instructional concerns and implement changes together (Deussen, Coskie, Robison, & Autio, 2007).

Although coaching as a PD practice in early childhood educational settings is relatively new, it is considered promising by some authors because it appears to be a natural bridge from the more abstract nature of theoretical training to the more concrete classroom application of new strategies (Dickison & Caswell, 2007; Neuman, 2010; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Podhajski & Nathan, 2005). Research on the impact of PD reveals that coaching enhances the effect of PD on teacher's practices when it is added to different modalities of specialized training such as workshops, lectures, or courses (Campbell & Milbourne, 2005; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008; Rudd, Lambert, Satterwhite, & Smith, 2009).

Communities of practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common professional interest and come together to improve their practice through sharing significant learning with one another (Wenger, 1998). The term was first used by Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe

apprenticeship, the process by which experts pass on knowledge to novices. The concept of communities of practice overlaps with related terms used in education to indicate practices where teachers learn from one another as they engage in students' work and lesson plans (Sheridan et al., 2009). Collaborative professional inquiry (Joyce, 2004), professional learning communities, and teacher's communities (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008) are some of the terms used in educational research to describe communities of practice. During their meetings, participants in communities of practice engage in reflection, planning, and mutual feedback to improve specific skills or to solve a problem. The resulting learning experience is often very relevant and applicable because the focus is placed on issues that emerge from teachers' authentic situations in their work (Sheridan et al., 2009). Learning communities have shown to increase collaboration, teacher empowerment, a focus on student learning, and continuous learning for teachers (Vescio et al., 2008). Communities of practice in early childhood education are closely related to participatory action research, which typically involves a group of teachers who face a real life problem and take action to correct it using a methodology that follows a cycle of reflection, planning, action, and observation (Baker & Peterson, 2010).

Research design and methods

This study employed a multiple case design. The two cases were the PD of the staff employed at two early childhood educational centers which each belong to the main institutions that provide free early childhood education in Chile. One of the centers belongs to JUNJI, an institution managed and funded by the state, created in 1970 to offer early childhood education to children in a situation of social disadvantage. The second center is part of Integra Foundation, a private, nonprofit institution created in 1990 that receives state funding to offer early childhood education to the poorest children in the country. Each of the centers where the study took place provides early education and care to over 200 children between 3 months and 5 years of age. Both centers are located in a municipality that has an average rate of poverty compared with other municipalities in Santiago, Chile's capital and largest city. Santiago extends throughout 37 municipalities with a population of over 6 million people (about 40% of the total population of Chile) characterized by an unequal income distribution. Santiago's residents predominately have Spanish ancestry, though some have French, German, Italian, or Croatian ancestry. Like other cities in Chile, the majority of the population practices Catholicism.

Participants

In each center, the selected participants hold the positions of center's directors and early childhood teachers. In total, two center directors and four early childhood teachers participated in the study. The criteria to select the educational centers and participants were: (a) centers geographically situated in Santiago, Chile (b) one center had to be selected from JUNJI and the other from Integra Foundation, (c) centers had to offer services to children between 0 and 5 years of age, (d) centers had to be big enough to have two classrooms per level of age, or at least two classrooms per most of the levels. Bigger centers were targeted because a larger staff would increase the chance to recruit the educators, (e) centers directors had to show interest in participation of their centers in the study and have a sense of having a staff willing to participate in the study, (f) for site

selection, the center director and at least two educators had to voluntarily agree to be interviewed. From the two educators to be chosen, one had to work with children between 0 and 3 years of age and the other with children between 3 and 5 years of age.

The demographic information of participants is provided in Table 1. Names of participants and centers have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

Name	Age	Years Worked at the Center	Years in Current Position	Years Worked in ECE	Highest Educational Degree in ECE
<u>El Roble center</u>					
María ^a	56	3	9	36	Bachelor's degree
Marta	56	6	33	33	Bachelor's degree
Eliana	54	17	36	36	Bachelor's degree
<u>Mawida center</u>					
Mónica ^a	38	2	7	13	Bachelor's degree
Carla	28	1	1	9	Bachelor's degree
Victoria	40	7	15	21	Bachelor's degree

Note. ECE = Early Childhood Education.

^a Center's director.

Data sources

Data were drawn from interviews, PD material available at the centers, and the first author's reflective journal. Seven semistructured interviews were held in the centers where participants were employed. Each participant was interviewed once except for a center's director who was interviewed twice. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, which is the native language of participants as well as the first author. The interviews started by gathering professional background information (e.g., educational degree, number of years worked in early childhood education) followed by questions focused on participants' perceptions of PD based on their experience. Audio recordings were reviewed after each interview to ensure that all questions had been covered. Transcription of the interviews was conducted once the process of data collection was completed.

With the authorization of center's directors, written material (e.g., manuals, books, guidelines) used to support PD activities in each center was gathered and reviewed to better understand the characteristics of PD activities experienced by participants at their centers. Some of the PD material was available for centers' employees in an electronic format at the institutional web pages while others were only available in hard copies held at the centers. The researcher kept notes of the purpose, format, and topics covered in the material as well as the directors' reports about how the material was used.

To provide greater context to the information gathered through interviews and review of PD material, the first author also kept a personal journal to record her experiences, observations, and reflections during the entire process of data collection. Observations written in the reflective journal were not analyzed separately from the interviews but

provided rich information that was used when coding and identifying themes in the course of the data analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted employing as a guide the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). They define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently if [sic] goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic” (p. 79).

On a practical level, the method involves the following steps: familiarization with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that their method does not assume any defined or confined theoretical or methodological program. Rather, they provide a description of what may be done with empirical material in a range of methodological contexts. Different from qualitative analytic methods that are tied to, or steaming from, a particular theoretical epistemological position—such as conversation analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, or narrative analysis—Braun and Clarke conceive of thematic analysis as a flexible research method that can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Flick, 2014).

Braun and Clarke’s methodological suggestions were considered suitable for the study because they provide clear(er) advice on how to do an analysis that is based on coding and it is not oriented to over-challenging aims such as developing theory—as in the case of grounded theory. Moreover, in contrast to qualitative content analysis—a classical procedure for analysing textual material—where categories are brought to the empirical material from theoretical models, the thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke can be done “inductively,” which means that codes and themes develop from the data.

We conducted the data analysis by first focusing on the transcription and reading the transcripts several times to become familiar with the breadth and depth of the content and interactions. Then, codes were developed from the material by identifying features of the data that appeared interesting. Coding was done on the content of the entire data set keeping in mind that statements could be coded in different themes simultaneously and that codes can be semantic (meanings expressed verbally) or latent (underlying meanings).

After coding, we started to consider how different codes may combine to form overarching themes, and what was the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes. As a result of this process we created a thematic map, combining codes to form overarching themes and subthemes. The criteria to determine themes and subthemes was based on the frequency of appearance of the information encompassed in the codes as well as their capacity to help in answering the research question driving the study. In coding and identifying themes we used ATLAS.ti (a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software) as a tool for supporting the process of qualitative data analysis. While we, as researchers, performed the conceptual analysis required to make sense of the data, the use of ATLAS.ti facilitated handling, managing, searching, and displaying data.

After identifying themes, we reviewed the coded data excerpts from which themes were generated, considering again whether they formed a coherent pattern. In this stage, less relevant themes were left out and some additional data within themes that had been missed earlier were coded and integrated. This led to a refined thematic map of three themes and 10 subthemes. The next section presents and discusses the main three themes identified after the completion of the process of data analysis: variety and value of professional development experiences, professional development needs, and working conditions.

Discussion of key findings

Variety and value of professional development experiences

Participants reported having engaged in a wide range of types of PD activities during their careers, including the following: induction (an introduction for new teachers in order to help them become familiar with the new job), beginning of the year intensive training (mentioned in one center), ongoing training, learning communities (mentioned in one center), and diplomas and degrees.

The different types of PD described by participants are consistent with much of the literature on early childhood PD. For instance, the activities identified as induction, ongoing training, and beginning of the year training can all be considered variations of what Sheridan et al. (2009) called “specialized training”, which includes activities such as conferences, workshops, and professional meetings, designed to impart knowledge in an attempt to impact professional practice. The pursuing of diplomas and degrees—described by participants in both centers as an important but insufficient opportunity of PD—corresponds to “formal education”, one of the common forms that PD takes in early childhood education (Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006). Furthermore, learning communities resemble the term “communities of practice” coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) and used in educational research to indicate practices where teachers learn from one another as they engage in student’s work. Interestingly however, although learning communities appeared in institutional documents as an avenue of PD in at least one of the centers, they were hardly mentioned by teachers. The center’s director elaborated on them only after direct inquiry during a second interview, reporting that in fact learning communities were an important and unique form of PD at the center. The lack of prominence of learning communities in participants’ discourse might be related to a low value placed on reflection and discussion among peers as a valid avenue for learning. This is consistent with the view of the center’s director, who pointed out that early childhood teachers were trained to associate learning almost exclusively with receiving knowledge from an “expert”, rather than with a creative process resulting from engaging in peer discussion and mutual feedback in their communities of practice.

Coaching, described in the literature as one of the most promising type of PD in terms of its impact in teacher practices, was not explicitly mentioned. However, participants in both centers talked about the “supervisors”, a position created by the institutions to support the centers’ staff in a broad range of issues including the identification and solving of problems, effective implementation of curriculum, and fulfillment of institutional goals. Supervisors assigned by the institution to support centers are to some extent expected to play the role of coaches for centers’ staff. But the nature of the supervisors’ role makes it difficult for them to truly serve as coaches because part of their responsibilities is to

oversee centers' proper functioning, serving as a bridge between the centers and central departments at the institutions. The fact that supervisors are accountable to the institution about staff progress can raise some level of reservation, caution, or even mistrust from supervisees. The staff might hesitate to freely express concerns and difficulties related to their tasks if they feel the supervisor will be more concerned with evaluating them than with providing support.

Considering the overall spectrum of PD activities, participants viewed it as a key element in the advancement of their professional careers that had a direct impact in their practices and children at their care. This is consistent with several studies that found improvement in teachers' knowledge and practices after PD implementation, usually using a variety of PD activities (Campbell & Milbourne, 2005; Dickinson & Caswell, 2007; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Pianta et al., 2008; Sandefur et al., 2010; van Keulen, 2010). It is important to note though, that most of those studies used standardized instruments to measure teachers and classrooms performance in order to determine the impact of PD activities while teachers' perceptions regarding PD activities were not explored. In this regard, the present study provides a complement to previous studies on the subject. The inclusion of teachers' perspectives on a topic that directly concern them is particularly relevant in the Chilean context, where early childhood teachers' voices have been historically underrepresented in educational research and teachers' opinions have often been absent in public debates concerning their preservice preparation and careers.

Professional development needs

Five significant PD needs were identified by participants.

Dosage Increase. Even though participants recognized that PD activities available at their centers were useful to them, they pointed out that often the dosage was not enough to really delve into a topic or develop new skills. They commented for instance, that induction and courses on specific topics, although helpful, were usually too superficial to allow substantial learning. This finding suggests that the amount of a particular PD activity might be as important as the type of activity or the topic addressed, which is consistent with Ramey et al.'s (2011) recommendation of giving careful consideration to dosage when implementing PD.

Instructors' greater level of specialization. Participants identified a need to receive more training from professionals with a greater level of specialization and expertise in the subject matters they taught. Teachers distinguished between "internal" (to the institution) and "external" experts. They reported to have less PD opportunities with external experts, who were considered to have a greater level of specialization in the subject matters being taught when compared to experts internal to the institution.

Greater access to ongoing PD. Participants expressed a need for access to ongoing training activities for a larger number of teachers. Even though attendance to ongoing training activities was considered beneficial by teachers, there was a concern about the difficulty in training the teams simultaneously. Usually, one or two teachers attended a course or workshop outside the center at a time. However, many of the trainings' contents were meant to be applied by a team and not by an isolated teacher. Once a teacher is back from a PD activity, she often finds there is no time to share what she learned, neither with her colleagues in charge of other classrooms nor with the technicians working in her

own classroom. This raises a practical issue for PD implementation related to whether training teams instead of individuals can increase the benefit derived from PD activities.

PD in specific subjects. Language and socioemotional development were the topics more frequently identified by participants as the content that needed to be addressed in PD activities. Knowledge and skills in fostering children's language and socioemotional development are an essential part of the set of abilities the country has agreed early childhood teachers should master (Ministerio de Educación, 2012). That set of abilities seems to be even more relevant when considering that participants at the centers approached work with a socially disadvantaged population in which children have historically performed poorer in all areas of development when compared to their more socially advantaged peers.

Improvement of teachers' preservice training. Participants pointed out that better preservice education was necessary to support the PD of both experienced early childhood teachers and newcomers to the workforce. Due to their long professional trajectory, some participants compared the initial education of new teachers over time, agreeing that preservice education had increasingly deteriorated. In the participants' views, the poor preparation currently received by student teachers negatively affects the benefit they can obtain later from PD activities, which often become purely remedial. Moreover, participants said that the poor preparation with which new teachers arrive to the center negatively affects their own professional advancement. Instead of developing partnerships that could be of mutual support in terms of the improvement of pedagogical practices in the classroom, they were compelled to spend time and energy supporting new teachers in the performance of tasks they should already know. These findings about participants' perceptions of the need to strengthen the initial education of early childhood teachers confirms what several researchers in the country have suggested as a critical step for the improvement of early childhood education (García-Huidobro, 2006; Rojas & Falabella, 2009; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2001).

Working conditions

Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with certain working conditions such as lack of time, increasing administrative work, high staff-child ratio and low wages. They viewed unfavorable working conditions as a hindrance for their PD and overall performance as teachers. As they were not directly asked about their working conditions, to some extent this topic is an unexpected finding of the study that, in at least one of the centers, might have been influenced by an institutional strike coincidentally happening at the time of the interviews. However, the reality of poor working conditions in early childhood education is neither new nor local. This finding reinforces the voices pointing out poor working conditions for early childhood teachers both internationally (Barnett, 2003; OECD, 2012b) and in Chile (García-Huidobro, 2006; Rojas & Falabella, 2009).

The issue of unsatisfactory working conditions raised by participants in this study is a good reminder that early childhood teachers' performance is not dependent only on initial education and in-service PD. There are broader contextual factors that should be considered when analyzing teachers' practices, their working conditions being one of them. Without enough time as a resource for instance, it is difficult to think of an adequate performance of routine tasks, let alone an effective process of PD implementation. As one center's director described it, lack of time "works against our

entire job”. If high staff-to-child ratio and increasing administrative tasks are added to the already scarce time, then time available for educative purposes become threatened as well as teachers’ level of satisfaction with their jobs because they might feel they are not doing what they have studied for—to educate children. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine if low wages are the cause or the result of the low status of the early childhood profession. However, the low wages of teachers are certainly a potent message of society’s valuation of early childhood education. While it is true that early childhood education has gained increasing attention and funding over the years, there is still a big gap between the official discourse about the relevance of early childhood education and the investment in those factors that make possible an adequate implementation of it. Better compensation of early childhood teachers is important not only to reduce the effort–reward imbalance of teachers already in the field, but also for hiring and retaining more capable teachers.

Suggestions for professionals in decision-making positions regarding PD

After reflecting on the results of the study, the review of the literature, and the characteristics of the Chilean early childhood education system, we would like to offer some suggestions that, we believe, can illuminate the development and improvement of teachers’ PD.

Suggestions for teacher education programs

Universities offering initial training can play an important role in informing and fostering debate about the different dimensions of teachers’ PD. This includes developing a culture among student teachers that recognize and value informal types of PD, especially those that involve reflection of their own practices. For example, student teachers would benefit from learning early on that learning communities are an important part of their future PD because the exchange among peers, identification of shared problems, and joint creation of solutions provide an avenue for learning that cannot be replaced by other types of PD.

Universities can also help to improve the lifelong PD of early childhood teachers by improving the quality of initial education they impart. PD should not only be a means to “repair” the deficiencies of a weak initial education, but a means of broadening and specialization of knowledge and skills that support teachers’ interactions with the children and families they work with. A stronger initial education in pedagogical and disciplinary areas would allow teachers to take more advantage of their PD opportunities once they are part of the workforce.

Suggestions for professional development designers

Institutions providing early childhood education would gain from maximizing the benefits of PD activities they already have. Induction for instance, could be expanded and strengthened by not limiting it only to introducing the institutional statute but also covering pedagogical topics that prepare new teachers for their tasks with children and families in their specific context. Ongoing training activities such as courses and

workshops could be improved by having more leaders with a greater expertise in the subject matters they teach. These PD activities would also benefit by including follow up sessions that allow continuity through personal feedback and answers to questions that might arise while teachers try to apply in the classroom what they have learned.

In addition to maximizing the benefits of PD activities already in place, PD designers could introduce coaching as a complementary form of PD, especially considering the good results yielded by this type of PD when it is combined with specialized training such as courses or workshops. For instance, coaching could be useful to support new teachers to become familiar with their work at the centers after the initial induction, or to help the entire staff to adopt new strategies or changes in the curriculum.

Furthermore, institutions offering early childhood education would benefit from developing a design of PD that fosters and protects PD activities, avoiding the threatening of their implementation by factors such as lack of time or excessive administrative work. To encourage professional advancement, institutions could create a design for teachers' careers that allows teachers get promoted as they become more experienced without necessarily quitting teaching. Currently, there is no adequate institutional recognition of teachers' range of professional experience. Often when good teachers are recognized by their performance, they are appointed for a higher position that almost always implies leaving the classroom. Thus, as they acquire more expertise, virtually the only option available to advance their careers is to abandon their roles as educators. A possible solution to this problem could be the creation of a model for teachers' careers that includes increasing levels of responsibilities and compensation as they progress in their work with children at the classroom level.

Suggestions for policymakers

Although institutions providing early childhood education have their own requirements for the PD of their staff, there is no public policy for early childhood teachers' PD in Chile. Therefore, creating one is the most imperative suggestion for policymakers. As a result of the understanding and full recognition of PD as an important avenue to improve teachers' training, policymakers could develop public policy that foster teachers' PD. In particular, teachers would benefit from a law that regulates their careers. Such a law should encompass the different elements involved in teachers' careers including working conditions, PD opportunities, and a retirement plan. Furthermore, since many of the elements that would improve PD implementation—more time assigned to PD, greater level of specialization, access to PD for a greater number of teachers, and improvement of working conditions—are hindered by scarce financial resources, policymakers could also support the improvement of PD implementation by assigning more financial resources to institutions providing public early childhood education.

Conclusions

By exploring teachers' perceptions of PD this study generated preliminary evidence that contributes to a better understanding of the state of early childhood PD in Chile. Employing a qualitative methodology provided a rich and in-depth perspective on teachers' perceptions about their PD. This brought to life and made visible teacher's voices, which have been rarely considered in early childhood education research in Chile.

What we learned from participants in this study is that they have access to a wide range of PD activities, which in fact covers almost the entire spectrum of PD formats described in the literature. Moreover, teachers placed a high value on PD, considering it an essential support to their performance and a factor that directly impacted the learning process of children at their care. However, not all experiences in PD participation were described as helpful and participants commented on several deficiencies that should be addressed for increasing PD effectiveness. PD needs identified by participants included: access to ongoing training activities for a greater number of teachers, greater duration and depth in induction sessions and ongoing training activities, more opportunities to receive training guided by experts, more training focused in topics related to language development and socioemotional development, improvement of the initial education of early childhood teachers, and improvement of working conditions. Due to the absence of previous studies exploring PD from teachers' perspectives in Chile, the findings of this study constitute an original contribution to the research in the field. Much of the PD needs reported by participants in this study are related to several broader issues that have been and continue to be debated in the early childhood education arena. Some of those issues are: financial funding for early childhood education, quality of early childhood teachers' initial education, lack of public policy regulating early childhood teachers' careers, and working conditions at early childhood educational centers.

Acknowledgements

This research was completed with approval from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) certificate number H13-00585.

This research was completed as a part of the thesis requirement for the first author for the Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education at the University of British Columbia. This researcher was supported by a Master Fellowship from the Chilean National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research.

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